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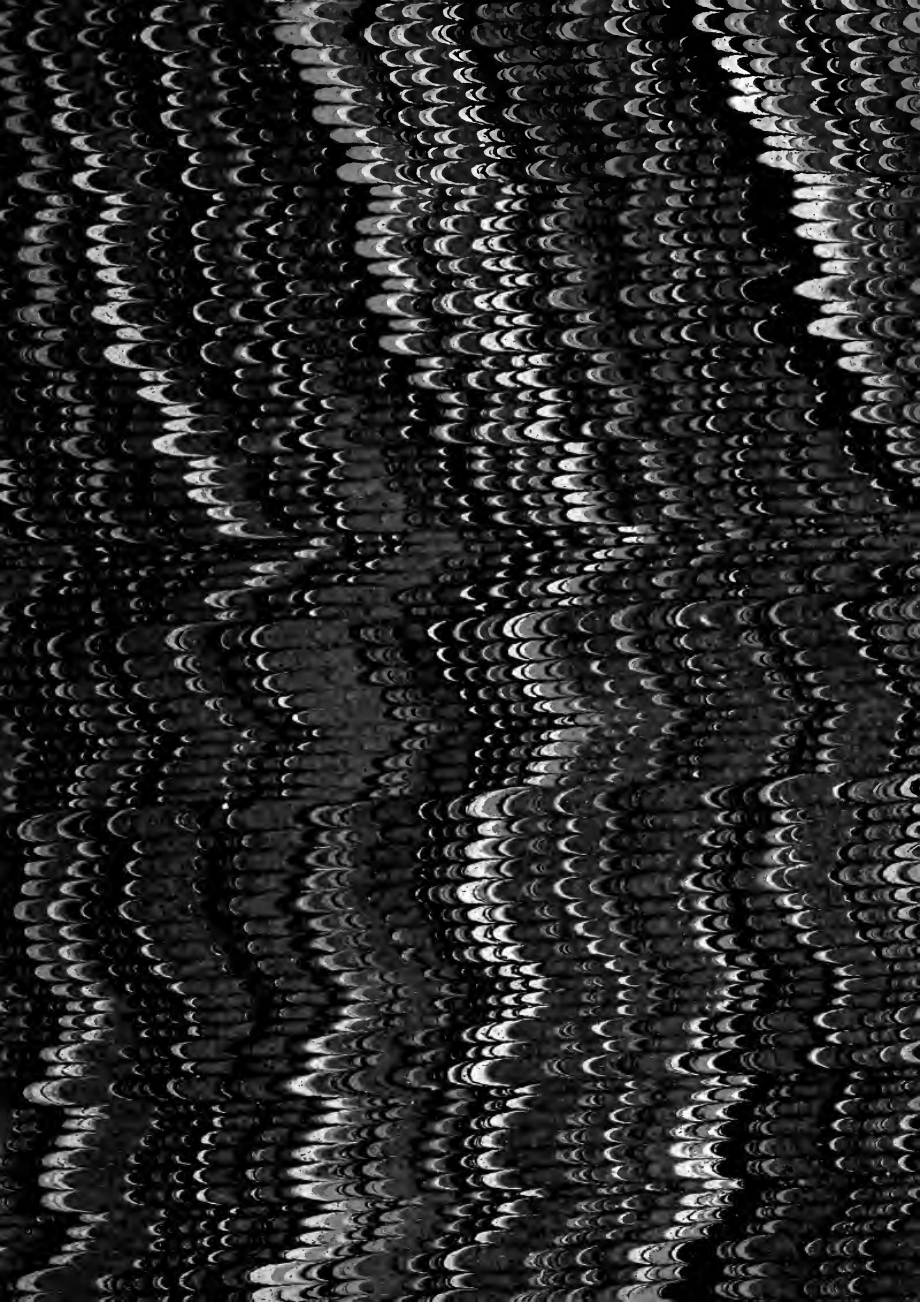
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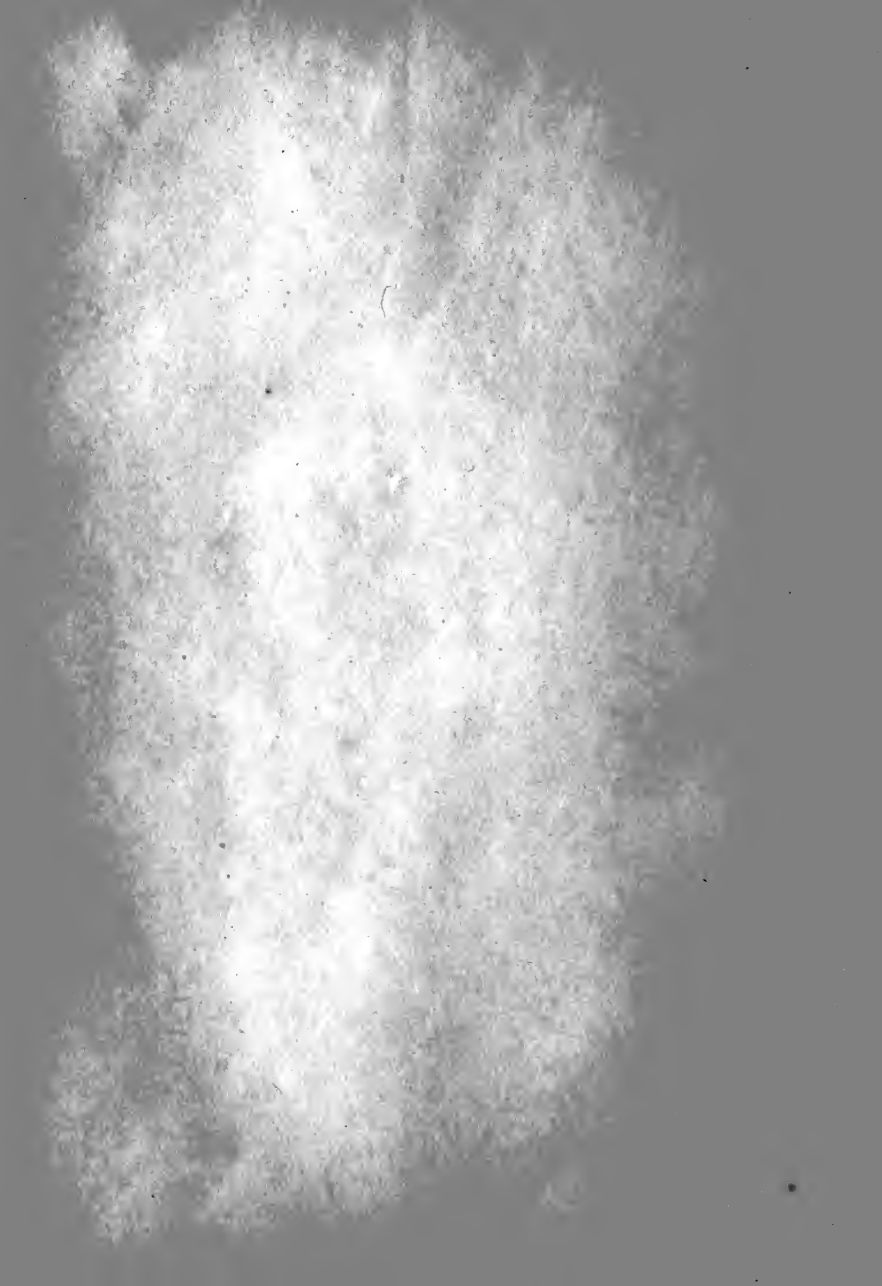
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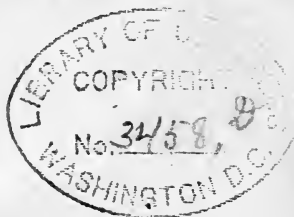
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THE CHOKED LIFE.

SOME THOUGHTS FOR LENT.

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BY
HENRY C. POTTER, D. D.

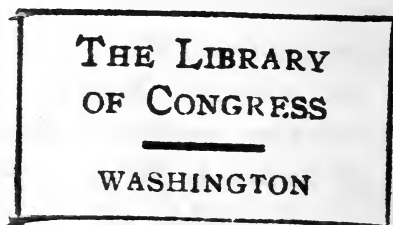
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THE CHOKED LIFE.

IT is not uncommon for men to speculate as to what would be the least obnoxious form of violent death. There are some deaths from which even the most iron nerve would at once and instinctively recoil. But there are others — if we may believe the testimony of science and the experience of individuals who have partially encountered them — which are at least not without decided alleviations. After the first moment of terror the man loses all sense of dying, and, as in the case of drowning, passes, not unfrequently, into a state of painless and delicious dreaminess. Indeed, this seems to be more or less true of all forms of death by suffocation. There are mortal wounds and shocks that leave the tokens of their horror behind them, and write their sig-

nature in the agonized lineaments of the dead whom they have murdered. But the young princes in the Tower were smothered, and gave no cry nor betrayed in their innocent faces any traces of the cruel doom that had overtaken them, and there are suicides who in some cowardly weariness of life have shut themselves up at night with the fumes of a charcoal furnace, only to be found dead in their beds in the morning with faces as calm as though they were asleep. It would seem as if being stifled or smothered to death were a far easier and less agonizing form of dissolution than we should at first suppose.

It is no wonder, therefore, that Christ employs suffocation as a type of the gradual death, which may come to pass in man, of his spiritual aspirations. For it describes that experience as we may easily observe it. If we look at all closely at what is going on about us in life, and, at what may be going on in ourselves, we shall see that the ascendancy which evil

gains over a human soul is never a sudden and sweeping one, but always gradual and often unobserved. It is like the presence of deadly gases in one's chamber, or the entrance of water into one's lungs. The worst of the evil is accomplished before we are aware of it, and delirium or unconsciousness is upon us before we are fairly alarmed. No man ever gave a vice, a meanness, or a sordid ambition a throne in his heart without parleying and dallying until his will had grown so weak that he could no longer resist it. It is the old fable over again, of the robber, who first asks permission only to put one foot inside the door, and then gradually insinuates, first his hand and then his shoulder, until, at length, the door flies open wide, and the peasant and his household are helpless before him.

It is just thus, as Christ in a Parable reminds us, with the Wheat and with the Tares which finally overtop, and so stifle, and choke and smother the wheat. At

the start, the grain and the thistle may seem to have an equal chance, — and they do, — for there is nourishment enough in the soil for either the wheat or the weed. But not enough for both of them. And so the weed, which, because it is the meaner thing grows the faster (even as all meaner things ripen quicker than nobler ones !) takes away the nourishment in the soil and shuts out the sun and the dew in the air from the slower-climbing grain, until at length it stifles it to death. Every blade and spear in the wheat-stalk is a lung, but when these tiny lungs would fain inhale the sun and the showers, lo, the sturdy, domineering weed has overtopped them, and they can scarcely breathe at all. And so, as the weed thrives and spreads, knitting itself into the soil with a tougher grip and sturdier roots, and spreading itself out over the field with taller shoots and ampler leafage, the wheat dwindles and starves, — suffocated literally to death, by the worthless but sturdy intruder that has overlaid it.

And therefore, Christ implies, what a perfect type is the whole destructive process of what sometimes goes on in the soul of man, — perfect, alike in the gradual stages of its progress, and in the precise character of its result. We need not stop to dispute with the Schoolmen as to what is called the germ theory in theology, for whatever views we may take concerning the doctrine of total depravity, or as to the possession by man of a seed or germ of renewable life, this much at least is certain, that there is in every human soul, no matter how alienated or ignorant, some dormant hunger, some stifled capacity, some aching memory of a lost ideal, which, whatever may ultimately become of it, Christ has meant to be the hint of a new and nobler life, at once patterned after and inspired by his own. And at the very start, therefore, every man's soul is like a field, in which the seed, sown there originally, when God made man's soul in his own image, and sown anew by the teachings of parental

love, by the Word of God, and by other but kindred agencies, since then, struggles to live and grow, and yet is in danger all the while of being choked to death.

And in the Parable already referred to, Christ tells us by what. "That which fell among thorns are they which, when they have heard, go forth and are choked with *cares*, and *riches*, and *pleasures* of this life." And this brings us to the thought which is central to the whole matter. Notice here, not merely that Christ tells how the soul, like the body, may be choked or suffocated to death, but most of all that those things which are aptest to accomplish this dreary and ruinous result are things in themselves absolutely and unequivocally innocent. Cares, riches, pleasures — there can be no such thing as life without having something to do with each one of them. Every faculty within us, pleads trumpet-tongued to ply itself, somehow, in connection with either the toil, the treasure, or the enjoyment of life. Nay, more, no

healthy career can be lived quite through without needing for its right ripening that at some point or other it bend under cares, or be tested by its stewardship (larger or smaller) of treasure, or quickened by its impulse and refreshed by its experience of enjoyment. To live truly, at all, is to have every one of these things educating us somehow by our daily and familiar contact with them into a larger life and loftier; and to renounce them utterly and run away from them into the pseudo-privacy of any hermit's cave or convent cell, is at once an act of cowardice and a crime!

But because all this is true, is there not, nevertheless, very real danger lest these innocent things, innocent enough in themselves considered, even as a weed is innocent, should, domineer so aggressively in a man's heart, as ultimately to smother or stifle its *inmost life* to death?

Take, for instance, first what we ordinarily call, — (a) The cares of life. It would be, verily, a deplorable thing if

any one among us were left free to live without cares. And, practically, care of various forms, so absolutely environs every ordinary life that to be free from it is simply impossible. But it by no means follows that he who gives the most time and thought and toil to the matter of grappling with these cares is living the highest style of life. On the contrary, it is entirely possible for a man to give himself so absolutely to his daily calling, that every added thoroughness in it is only an added evil, bought at a price so exorbitant that it had better never been bought at all. I know very well that such a doctrine as this is in direct contravention of all the noisier teaching of our age. I know that its utilitarian spirit clamors that the highest use of a man in the world is to do his work, diligently and thoroughly and well. But I take issue with any such teaching, absolutely. I affirm that the highest aim of man is not to do any work whatsoever, save as it upbuilds and enlarges and enno-

bles himself! It is not to be wondered at that when one sets himself to any task in life he should long to perform it completely and symmetrically. That longing is an echo of the divine impulse toward perfectness in every man, which is the signature of the Being who made him. But to be so absorbed in the daily round of business or housekeeping, of traffic or care-taking, that the mind has no strength nor desire to rise above it, this is not manly service, but ignoble slavery. And yet how many men are galled by its chain! As the world stands apart and watches them, it cries in noisiest enthusiasm, "What splendid devotion to one's business! See how the plans that the man has hatched in his restless brain fly out of them, thought out and articulated in every least detail! See how this schemer knows how to use men and make them supplement himself! What masterly foresight in his calculations; what more than magical swiftness in their realization! Look, ye beginners in life,

at the truly successful man, and take pattern from his energy and his achievement." Aye! success and achievement, but in what? Come closer to this tireless toiler, this penetrating thinker, and see how it fares with himself. Verily, the man's work is the very perfection of achievement, but how is it, meanwhile, with the worker? Will we never learn that a man is greater, in God's account, than his work, and that in the final analysis of human achievement the supreme and crucial question will be not "What have you wrought in life?" but "What has life wrought in *you*?" What matters it if you have originated the cleverest schemes, and conducted them to the most brilliant perfection; what matters it if a man has planned and engineered and carried to completion some gigantic highway of commerce that binds two hemispheres in one, if, when it is done, we find him chained to one end of his work and revolving there in ceaseless devotion to its drudgery, like any beast of burden in a

treadmill ! It is, verily, a brave thing to bend steadfastly and courageously to one's task, but to stoop down till one can no longer stand erect ; to let your work drive you as if you were the veriest galley slave ; to be so full of the fret and worry and burden of a thousand pestiferous cares that they string and torture you like gnats ; and call this anything less than a despicable and degrading bondage, is a libel on our Maker and ourselves ! If He has called me to buy or to sell, to hew wood or to draw water, to watch the scales that tremble on the humblest counter, or to hold those other scales in which are weighed the conflicting interests of men, — whether He has bidden me to be a judge on the bench, in other words, or a clerk in the shop, or a journeyman on the wall, I will do what my hands or brain find to do, and as the Apostle bids me, “ do it heartily.” But to be so eager in one's work as to have no eagerness that rises above it, this, no matter what the world may say, or what the work may be,

is not success but failure. There are men whose career is like a miner's, — digging and delving in a shaft. Time was when the man felt the sun, and heard the birds, and looked up and saw the stars. But every blow of his pick, and every spade full of earth that he throws behind him, only carries him farther and deeper down, away from light and warmth and life. Time was with many a man when he heard a voice which rang in his ears with the sound of a trumpet, saying, "*Son give me thy heart!*" He hears it still, sometimes. But it is as when one standing at the mouth of a mine calls down into its cavernous depths. Such an one may suddenly have awakened to the peril of the solitary and self-absorbed toiler below. There is water rising in a neighboring shaft. The man alone there may be cut off, and perish without warning. And the thought of all this thrills in his friend's voice as he cries with all his might down the long black-throated abyss which yawns wide open before him. But, when

the sound reaches the toiler below, it is only a faint murmur, an indistinguishable sound, and if he hears it at all, he hears it only to disregard it. Just so, to-day, and right here among us, are men and women whose whole life has been a process of *digging down*, and now they are so far buried and walled over with their cares that they are in danger of being smothered or stifled to death.

(b) And as of the cares of the world, so of its riches. One cannot wonder that men seek wealth not merely because it smooths life and softens its asperities, but also because, like intellect or character or courage, though in a lower and inferior way, it is a power, something which, in human undertakings, almost coerces results. And quite innocently, too, as I have implied, a man may desire and go after it. But covetousness has well been called one of the tyrant passions; and once let the desire of wealth for its own sake get rooted in a man's heart, and straightway the struggle be-

comes a tragic one. O, have I not seen one in whom every manly and Christian trait had begun to grow and thrive, gradually turned into a sharp, hard huckstering hoarder, simply by this mighty passion for gold! Once he was ingenuous and tender, and open-handed and uncalculating, and now the fresh aspirations that once filled his soul with longings toward unselfish doing for the Master, are quenched in the despicable desire to astonish the world, when he shall go out of it, with the accumulations which he has left behind him. When he shall go out of the world, did I say? Nay, he has practically ceased to live and gone out of it already! True, he walks about the streets and overreaches other men, and is remorseless in dealing with his creditors, but he is nothing but a galvanized corpse, after all. If by any means you could lay your hand against that inmost organism of the man whereby the pulse-beats of the soul tell out its life, you would find no answering throb, no faintest sign of life. You

remember that Italian nobleman who, to revenge himself upon a woman, doomed her to be bricked up in a narrow niche in his lonely castle wall. Even so, here and to-day, there are men who are piling up their golden bricks about themselves. Day by day the man stands in his niche and builds his golden wall a little higher. Brick by brick it rises, contracting as it mounts, until the topmost brick is in its place, the turn of the arch is completed, the last orifice is closed, and behind that golden pile there is simply a man *stifled to death*. He is not buried indeed, but his manhood is buried. The tares have choked the wheat, and so the wheat has perished.

(c) But there are many of us whose better life it is not care or wealth that is stifling, but pleasure. It is said quite frequently, that we Americans are not in danger from too much play but from too little. And if, by play, is meant healthful and hearty relaxation, I verily believe it. If there is one thing that marks our

social life in this generation in contrast with those that have preceded it, it is its dreary want of vivacity. But one reason for this is that we have mistaken the true nature of play or pleasure, and then have mistaken its function. Pleasure is not a vocation but an interlude, and like all truly pleasing interludes, its chiefest charm ought to reside in the fact that it is largely spontaneous and unstudied. If any one of us thinks that God put him into the world simply and solely to enjoy himself, then verily he ought to be alarmed at the tremendous discrepancy between his equipment and his responsibilities! Is there no higher function for a man's brain and heart than laboriously to desire means for having a good time, as it is called? If I believed so, I think I should lose my faith in God, and turn infidel, for I should feel that a Being who had endowed his creatures with such upward-climbing aspirations for so mean and poor an end, could not be worthy of the name of God.

And therefore, when any one of us has come to that point where his life has become a mere pursuit of pleasure, he may be sure that something is wrong. Already he may well be afraid that that stifling process has begun in him wherein the pleasure-life threatens ultimately to swallow up, and so strangle and choke out all other life. And this too, though one's pleasures may in themselves considered be innocent and harmless and even helpful. For pleasure, just because it is relaxation, may easily pass over from relaxation into laxity. The nature, too long relaxed and indulged, may at length become hopelessly unstrung. And then we have as the dreary and hopeless result of it all, a class of men and women with whom life means simply waiting for a fresh sensation. Alas ! have we not met these burdens and blotches upon humanity, — Epicureans, without the culture of Epicurus ; Grecian in their sensuous hunger for something to stimulate the cloyed palate and thrill the torpid nerves, but utterly

without the grace and sunshine and poetry of the Greek? Men who will study a *menu* as if it were a play of Shakespeare, or a poem of Milton, and women who will look forward to a ball-room as if its glare disclosed the divinest visions possible to a human soul! And is it for this, O man, O woman, that God made you after an image so regal and with powers so god-like? Nay, can you be content to live a life which only seeks existence for its sensuous sweetness, and misses quite its grander and sacred meaning. Have you never seen a child, in some crowded, overheated room, where the air was heavy and tainted, press its hand to its side and gasp, fairly, in its faint, half-dizzy longing for a cooler, purer atmosphere? And, are there no moments in your own experience when, half-stifled in this ceaseless round of gayety and pleasure-seeking, your soul has gasped for loftier and purer airs, and your dissatisfied affections have cried out in their utter weariness and satiety, "O God! is this to live? Is

there nothing worthier than this endless round of vulgar self-indulgence, where the soul is dragged down into the foetid sluices of the flesh, and where all existence is turned into a ceaseless, aimless feeding of the senses ? ”

Tell me, has there been nothing like that, whispered at least to yourself if not uttered in the ears of others ? For if there has, then remember that it is the struggling of that deepest life in you, choked and smothered now by the tares, but striving not quite to die. In God's name, I pray you give it a chance to live ! Ask Him, whose Cross is the witness of his love for you to help you to pluck up the tares ! Cry to Him to send, if need be, all roughest winds, all sharpest frosts, if by any means He will uproot and choke out the weeds that are strangling and starving your soul's life. God made you to bear fruitage for Himself. See whether, during this Lent, you cannot do something to give his grace in you a better chance ! Are there no weeds for you yourself to

grapple with? Is there nothing in you which is choking the seed which the Spirit has sown in your heart? Let it not be said at last that that seed was sown in you in vain!

The
Choked Life.



Henry C. Potter.

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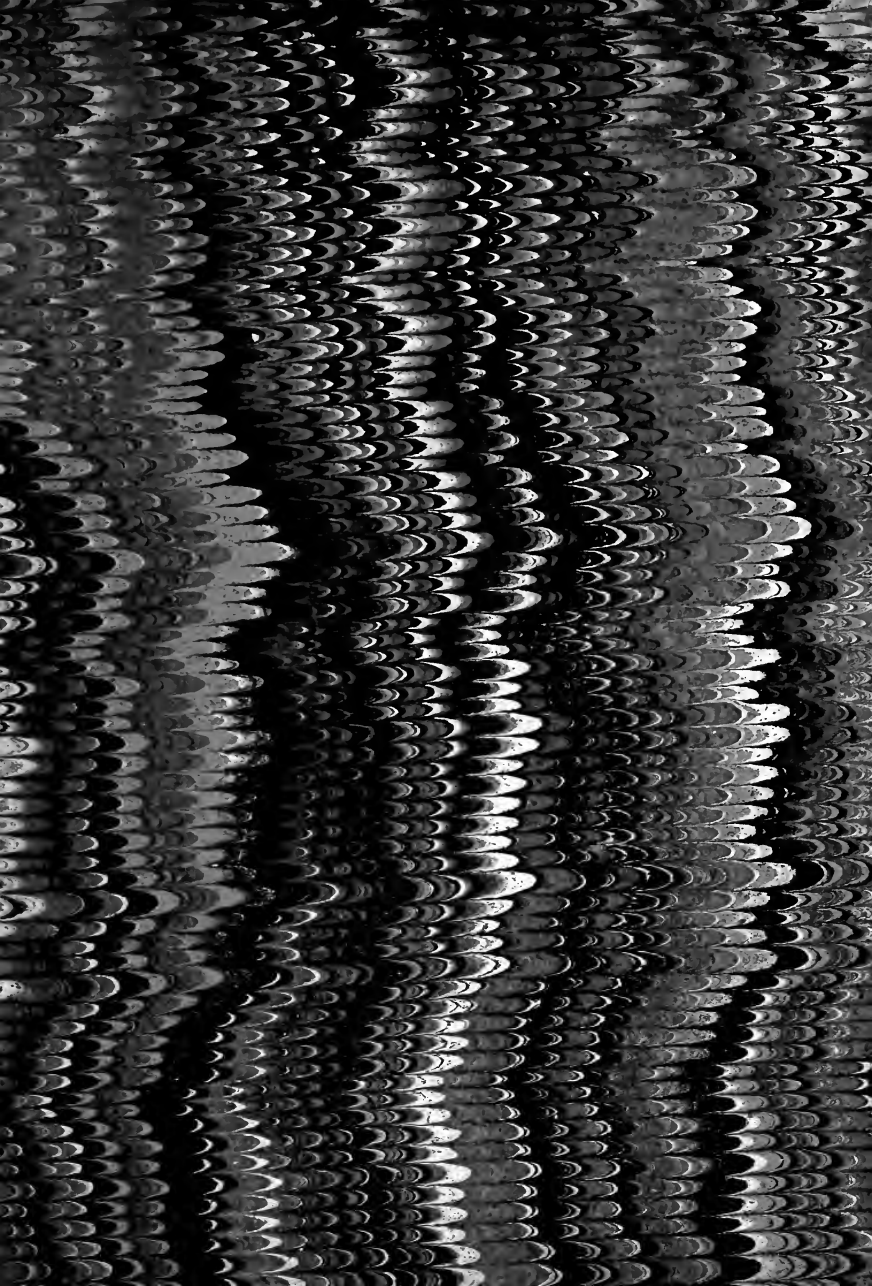


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